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But This Could Be an Obstacle

By David Wise

WASHINGTON

The news that an Italian state prosecutor has accused the Bulgarian secret service of recruiting Mehmet Ali Agca to kill the Pope could not come at a worse moment for the Reagan Administration.

Although the report of the state prosecutor, based on a three-year investigation by Italian magistrate Illario Martella, does not directly accuse the Soviet KGB of running the operation, it contains hints pointing in that direction. The prosecutor says that the Bulgarians tried to murder Pope John Paul II in 1981 because they believed the Polish pontiff was encouraging the Solidarity movement in Poland and unrest in Eastern Europe.

The charge of Bulgarian, and by implication, KGB complicity in the plot to kill the Pope, is not proved, of course. But the timing is extremely awkward for President Reagan. Casting aside his Cold War rhetoric and talk of the Soviets as an "evil empire," Reagan is pushing as hard as he can for an election-year summit meeting with Konstantin U. Chernenko, the leader of the Soviet Union.

The economy, after all, despite rising interest rates, is in fairly good shape. The chief area of vulnerability for Reagan when he faces his Democratic opponent this fall is the the perception of some voters that Reagan is "trigger happy," and could lead the country into war. It is a charge that Walter F. Mondale is sure to exploit.

But the issue can be defused and turned to the President's advantage, if only he can get the Russians to the negotiating table. Yet, it is awkward for Reagan, an old Cold Warrior, to extend an olive branch to the Russians if it can be shown that they gave the order to shoot the Pope. True, Yuri Andropov, the chief of the KGB in May, 1981, at the time of the attack on the pontiff, is dead. But it would be scarcely less easy for Reagan to sit down with his successor if it is demonstrated to the world that the Soviets use political assassination as an instrument of national policy.

The plot against the Pope, as outlined in the prosecutor's report and the magistrate's investigation, is a complex tale of conspiracy involving the Gray Wolves, a right-wing Turkish nationalist group, members of the Turkish Mafia and Bulgarian intelligence agents. The cast of characters includes three major actors with confusingly similar names. But the charges appear to boil down to these:

The Bulgarian Secret Service, believing the Communist Bloc in Eastern Europe to be in "mortal danger," contracted with Bekir Celenk and a second Turkish Mafia leader to pay $1.25 million to Agca and two Turkish confederates. Agca was to shoot the Pope, which he did, but the Pontiff survived. The Italian prosecutor has asked for the indictment of the three Bulgarians and six Turks.

Do the world's intelligence services engage in political assassination? In the case of the Bulgarians, the answer would appear to be yes. The Durzhavna Sigurnost, or DS, the Bulgarian service, operates out of a yellow building at 30 General Gurko St. in downtown Sofia. Six years ago in London, a prominent Bulgarian writer and exile, Georgi Markov, was jabbed with an umbrella by a man with a foreign accent, who mumbled "I'm sorry," jumped into a cab and disappeared.

Later in the day, Markov fell ill with a high fever and four days after that, he died. Scotland Yard detectives found a tiny, perfectly round pellet made out of platinum and iridium, one-fifteenth of an inch in diameter, embedded in Markov's thigh. Four microscopic holes had been drilled into the pellet, and each hole contained a highly toxic poison, which British intelligence believes to have been ricin, a derivative of the castor bean plant. One ounce could kill 90,000 people.

Ten days before the attack on Markov, another prominent Bulgarian exile, Vladimir Kostov, was riding the escalator out of the Paris metro when he felt a sharp pain in his back. He, too, developed a high fever, but survived. After reading about Markov, Kostov was examined. French surgeons removed a pellet from his back identical to the one that killed Markov.

In the past, at least, the KGB has also carried out assassinations. SMERSH, the Soviet murder apparatus popularized by Ian Fleming in the James Bond novels, was in fact the name of units established by the Cheka, the KGB's predecessor, to spy on the military. It also had the power to execute spies, and did.

The Soviet secret police apparently killed a defector, Walter Krivitsky, in Washington in 1941, a few months after Leon Trotsky, Stalin's rival, was murdered with an ice ax in Mexico. In the 1950s, the KGB twice sent a killer to Munich who murdered two Ukranian exile leaders with a prussic-acid vapor gun.

Until Stalin's death, the Soviet assassination arm was known as the Spetsburo. Later it became the 13th Department, then Department V, in charge of "wet affairs."

But murdering Bulgarian or Soviet exiles is one thing, attacks on heads of state is another. The author Edward Jay Epstein has suggested that Lee Harvey Oswald, the presumed assassin of President John F. Kennedy, had been recruited by the KGB when he lived in the Soviet Union, a theory that is not proved. The case against [illegible] aside, most Western intelligence [illegible]ts believe that the KGB is not now in [illegible]assination business, at least not in [illegible]usiness of murdering heads of state.

The CIA, however, did engage in assassination attempts against foreign leaders. According to the 1976 final report of the Church Committee, the Senate panel created to investigate abuses by the intelligence agencies, the CIA plotted against eight foreign leaders, five of whom died violently, although the CIA's role varied from case to case.

In 1961, the CIA set up a special "Executive Action" unit to develop, in the words of the committee report, "a capability to assassinate foreign leaders." The CIA unit recruited two Mafia hoodlums to try to poison Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The CIA also tried to kill Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba by coating his tooth brush with deadly disease-bearing bacteria. But President Reagan's executive order on intelligence forbids the CIA to engage in assassinations.

The parallel can be drawn to nuclear arsenals on both sides. As long as they exist, so the argument goes, they will not be used. The same sort of standoff may exist in the murky realm of assassinations. Perhaps. But if the charges against the Bulgarians are true, and if a link can be shown to the KGB—which would be very difficult to prove in court—the case of the papal plot could obviously have serious foreign-policy implications for the United States and the Reagan Administration.

In an election year, it is a possibility that [illegible]hite House would rather not have to

David Wise writes frequently on intelligence. His most recent book is a novel of espionage, "The Children's Game."

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